DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 356 181 SO 023 035

AUTHOR Beauchamp, Edward R.
TITLE Japanese and U.S. Education Compared. Fastback 338.
INSTITUTION Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, Bloomington, Ind.
REPORT NO ISBN-0-87367-338-7
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 36p.
AVAILABLE FROM Phi Delta Kappa, P.O. Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402-0789 ($1.25; members, $1; quantity discounts).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; Compulsory Education; Cross Cultural Studies; *Cultural Traits; Educational Administration; *Educational Quality; Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Social Values
IDENTIFIERS *Japanese Education; *United States

ABSTRACT

This document presents a comparative analysis of education in Japan and the United States. The report explores differences between U.S. and Japanese culture. While the United States may be characterized by its diversity, Japanese culture is distinctive in the extent of its uniformity. Japan, moreover, has a highly centralized educational system; U.S. education is extremely decentralized. Education is compulsory in both countries, until age 16 in most U.S. states, and until 15 in Japan. While many students in the United States work or participate in other activities, Japan tends to view schooling as a student's job. Japanese students face a longer school year and a more rigorous, government controlled curriculum than do their U.S. counterparts. In Japan, teaching is a more highly respected and rewarded field than it is in the United States. There are major attitudinal differences concerning schooling in the two countries. The United States tends to emphasize students' abilities, while the Japanese place greater emphasis on persistence and personal responsibility. From the Japanese system, the United States can learn: (1) the true value of taking education seriously; (2) the need to raise academic standards; and (3) the ability to spend wisely on education. (Contains 15 references.) (LBG)

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Japanese and U.S. Education Compared

Edward R. Beauchamp

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Series Editor, Derek L. Burleson

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Japanese and U.S. Education Compared

by
Edward R. Beauchamp

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 92-64134
ISBN 0-87367-338-7
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Bloomington, Indiana

This fastback is sponsored by the Morehead State University (Kentucky) Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa, which made a generous contribution toward publication costs.

The chapter sponsors this fastback to celebrate its Silver Anniversary. The chapter was installed on November 11, 1967.

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Introduction

For the past decade, the U.S. mass media have been filled with articles extolling the virtues of Japanese education, with some suggesting that if our schools were more like the Japanese, we could easily solve our nation's educational problems. This phenomenon has been reinforced by a number of popular books, such as Ezra Vogel's *Japan as No. One*, which paints a picture of Japanese education that, while not inaccurate, is at least misleading.

Undoubtedly the Japanese education system embraces many strengths, but these strengths usually do not "fit" into an alien American social context. More importantly, many of those who paint glowing pictures of the Japanese education system overlook the considerable weaknesses of that system. Those who advocate adopting the practices of foreign education systems offer a false promise, which poses a real danger to those who are seeking educational reform. The educational arrangements of every society are a natural outgrowth of that society's historical development, cultural elements, and economic/political realities. One cannot simply "borrow" willy-nilly what appears to be working in one country and expect it to work when transported out of its natural environment.

To make a point-by-point comparison of the numerous elements of U.S. and Japanese education would require a manuscript that far exceeds the space limitations of a fastback. What follows, therefore, is highly selective, focusing on only a few of the more interesting

and, in my judgment, most important elements distinguishing the U.S. and Japanese systems.

Since most readers of this fastback will be Americans who know the U.S. system more intimately than the Japanese system, I have deliberately devoted more space to discussing the Japanese situation. Moreover, since most Americans, as well as Japanese, accept that U.S. higher education is among the best in the world and that Japanese higher education is probably the weak link of the Japanese system, this fastback will focus on the precollegiate elements in both systems.

How Education Differs in the U.S. and Japan

In order to understand the evolution of the Japanese system of education, one needs to know that it reflects a very long history of essentially Confucian ideas and values, including a deeply rooted respect for learning and for those who devote their lives to learning. There is also a culturally embedded emphasis on group conformity and a hierarchical social structure. Citizens are expected to defer to authority and to contribute to a harmonious social order rather than pursue personal goals, which are perceived as selfish individualism.

By contrast, Americans hold an almost mystical belief in the inalienable rights of the individual, a notion many Japanese have difficulty understanding. American rhetoric, if not always matched by actions, emphasizes equality along with liberty and a citizenry that speaks its mind on all sorts of issues. Perhaps as a result of its frontier experience, American society is characterized by a streak of anti-intellectualism and a fundamental distrust of authority. These differences are fundamental in understanding the culture within which each education system is embedded. They also provide a caution to those who suggest that either country "borrow" from the other.

Diversity vs. Uniformity

Perhaps the most commonly accepted generalizations made about the United States and Japan are that the U.S. is characterized by a ram-

pant individualism accompanied by an emphasis on individual achievement, whereas Japan is best characterized by the centrality of the group and the primacy of harmony, often at the expense of individual interests. Without suggesting that geography is the determining influence underlying these social characteristics, one might profitably look to that discipline to understand factors that at least played a role in shaping these characteristics.

One of the fundamental differences between the United States and Japan can be found in their respective geographic environments and the social, economic, and cultural arrangements flowing from them. Since Colonial times Americans have enjoyed the considerable advantage of living on a continent with a vast amount of space for expansion, while the Japanese are crammed into an archipelago the size of California, with approximately 80% of the land mountainous. These basic geographic differences have played an important role in shaping the structure of each society. Having a huge land mass within which to build a society, Americans tended to develop such characteristics as individualism, openness, mobility, experimentation, practicality, and a tolerance for diversity. The continuing influx of highly diverse cultural, religious, and linguistic groups into American society tended to reinforce these characteristics.

Japan, on the other hand, developed as a highly homogeneous society, sharing a single monocultural context. Although Japan has several different religious groups (including Buddhists, Shintoists, Christians, as well as a number of other groups), the Japanese tend to be fairly casual in their religious outlook. This racial, cultural, and religious homogeneity has tended to reinforce such central Japanese characteristics as strong group orientation and the primacy of harmony in social relations.

Thus, diversity and uniformity are reflected in each nation's educational system. The highly diverse American population is a mosaic of ethnic, racial, and cultural groups. Due to the continuing influx of immigrants and refugees from Latin America, Southeast Asia, Rus-

sia, and elsewhere, there is an urgent need to be concerned with bilingual and multicultural education. In Japan, on the other hand, there is a traditional aversion to minorities, which is reflected in the Japanese word for foreigner, *gaijin*, or outsider.

Although there is a form of minority education focused on a relatively small Korean population living in several large Japanese cities, most Japanese still see themselves as racially pure. This powerful concept of a homogeneous group serves to legitimize and reinforce the notion of uniformity within Japanese society.

Decentralization vs. Centralization

As a result of its geography, diverse populations, and strong sense of individualism (which also translates into distrust of the central government in Washington), the United States has historically, as an article of faith, believed in local control of schools. Although there has been a centralizing trend in the larger American society since the last quarter of the 19th century, the dominant theme in American education is still one of decentralization. As a result, local control of public education still carries a powerful message in the United States. This, of course, means that there is a wide variety of curricular arrangements and a lucrative free market for textbooks.

Decentralization also has resulted in an inequitable system of school financing, with spending for education varying widely depending on the state or community in which one lives. Thus accident of birth often means that the child attending school in Scarsdale, New York, or Winnetka, Illinois, is far better off in terms of facilities and good teachers than the child growing up in the South Bronx or Watts. Although federal and state courts have attempted to address this situation, educational inequity remains a problem throughout the nation.

Japan, on the other hand, enjoys a highly centralized system of education that is modeled on that of Napoleonic France in the 19th century. Whatever weaknesses such a model may have, it does impose clear national standards that are lacking in the decentralized Ameri-

can system. The Japanese Ministry of Education is the center of power and specifies a national Course of Study for all subjects. The syllabus for each subject is set out in great detail, stipulating the content to be covered and the number of hours that it is to be taught. In addition, all textbooks must be geared to cover the content of a particular Course of Study and must meet the standards set by the Ministry's Textbook Authorization System. Without the Ministry's authorization, textbooks cannot be used in the schools.

One of the most controversial issues surrounding the Japanese textbook system is what amounts to political censorship, especially in history and the social sciences or with any topics considered unorthodox or controversial. This, of course, restricts textbook writers, who must be careful not to give the Ministry's bureaucrats a reason to withhold approval of their manuscript. However, the system has been challenged by writers, such as Professor Ienaga Saburo, who have filed lawsuits charging that the textbook authorization system is unconstitutional. The Ministry, on the other hand, fears that the leftist Japan Teachers Union (Nikkyoso) will manipulate the textbook system to promote its political agenda. Therefore, the Ministry retains a tight rein under the guise of protecting "educational neutrality."

Of course, the decentralized U.S. system of allowing the marketplace to determine which textbooks are adopted is not without its problems. For example, the large states (New York, California, Texas, etc.) wield a disproportionate influence over textbook content and design because of their tremendous purchasing power. Also, some U.S. publishers have been criticized for "dumbing down" textbook content in response to teachers' requests for simpler reading material for slower students.

While the kind of control exercised by the Ministry of Education runs against the grain of most U.S. educators, it is interesting to note that an increasing number of voices in the U.S. are calling for a national curriculum and national standards. Perhaps the most cogent argument favoring a centrally prescribed curriculum is that it ensures

that every child is exposed to the same knowledge base. It is fair to say that a Japanese child, whether living in Osaka, Tokyo, or Sapporo, will enjoy basically the same level of support and quality of teaching.

Compulsory Education

Although compulsory education laws in the United States vary from state to state, most states require a youngster's presence in school until either age 16 or 18. Despite attempts to keep youngsters in school, less than eight of every ten American youth complete high school. The rest drop out before graduation, and even some of those who do graduate are functionally illiterate.

In Japan the law requires that one attend school only until age 15, or completion of grade 9. Despite this rather modest requirement, virtually all Japanese pupils successfully complete grade 9; and 94% of these go on to complete the non-compulsory three years of high school. Indeed, the number of Japanese youth attending some form of higher education is second only to the United States.

U.S. students are encouraged to use their after-school hours in part-time work (to earn spending money, to save for college, or more often, to purchase and maintain an automobile) and/or to participate in organized sports, cheerleading, clubs, etc. Japanese students, however, are generally expected to accept their student status as their "job," more precisely as the job for one who has yet to attain adulthood. And this job is serious business, with high expectations for appropriate behavior.

Virtually all Japanese private schools and many public schools require student uniforms, with strict regulations prescribing how they must be worn. Female students must forego makeup of any kind, and both male and female hair styles are regulated in minute detail.

In Japan one cannot own an automobile until age 18 (in Tokyo a personal parking space is required as a condition of ownership), and it would be unthinkable for a student to drive to and from school.

Although one can legally own a motor bike at age 16, many schools forbid their students to do so. Indeed, Japanese schools' control over students even extends beyond the school grounds and the school day. It is not uncommon for a school to bar students from holding part-time, after-school jobs. In fact, secondary schools generally ban their students from entering coffee houses and *pachinko* (pinball) parlors. It is also common practice for the school to be the first to be informed by the police when a student is in trouble.

As a result, Japanese youngsters who aspire to attend a good university (and the pressure to do so is enormous) will be found after school and on weekends in "cram schools," or *juku*. These *juku* are not part of the formal school system but are private ventures that have an interdependent relationship with the public schools. They provide "supplementary" after-school classes considered necessary to succeed on the university entrance examinations. There is nothing equivalent to these "cram schools" in the United States, but some of the flavor can be seen in such enterprises as Stanley J. Kaplan's Education Centers.

School Year and School Life

The typical pattern for U.S. students is to attend school from approximately the day after Labor Day in early September to early June, totaling about 180 days (excluding "snow days" and the like). The school day varies from place to place but typically averages between six or seven hours per day. In Japan the school year is 240 days (including Saturday mornings). The school year begins in early April and ends in March of the following year. Although the Japanese school day is roughly equivalent to that of the United States, the time on task is significantly greater in the Japanese classroom.

U.S. schools generally have a three-month summer vacation, plus a Christmas vacation, a spring break, and several days off for national and state holidays. In Japan, there is no long summer hiatus but rather several shorter holidays scattered throughout the year. More significantly, the shorter Japanese summer holiday is more than merely

a "vacation." It is common for Japanese students to have substantial summer assignments requiring a great deal of time and effort to complete. Because these assignments are often in the form of projects requiring the cooperation of the entire family, they are taken seriously.

When all of these factors are taken into account, one can see that the Japanese youngster has the equivalent of three to four more years of schooling than U.S. students do by the time they graduate from high school. It should not be surprising, therefore, that the typical Japanese pupil has a much broader and sophisticated knowledge base by the end of high school.

It also should be pointed out that Japanese youth work much harder in high school than do U.S. teens. However, this does not hold true at the college level. With some exceptions, Japanese college students tend to rest on their laurels after completing the arduous entrance examinations and gaining admission to the university of their choice. It would probably be fair to say that students in both the United States and Japan take a vacation from their school work, but at different times in their academic career. While many U.S. students coast through their high school years but work hard in college, the typical pattern for Japanese youth is to expend much more energy in preparing for and passing the entrance examination to the college or university of their choice than is exerted during their undergraduate experience.

The Curriculum

Japan has a *national* curriculum with the Ministry of Education ultimately accountable for its results. This centralization explains in part why academic achievement (or mastery of the curriculum) is at a higher level in Japanese schools. Every subject taught in Japanese schools (as well as the way it is taught) is shaped by compulsory Courses of Study carefully crafted by career bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education. The curriculum not only offers more rigorous aca-

demic content but is also much more fully articulated from kindergarten through high school. As a result, there is a logical progression of academic content with little unnecessary repetition. By contrast, the typical curriculum in U.S. schools tends to be far less rigorous, much more fragmented, experimental, and pupil-centered and is often subject to the vagaries of local politics.

Japanese textbooks differ greatly in both appearance and content from those published in the United States. U.S. textbooks tend to be huge tomes that are lavishly illustrated with color photographs, charts, graphs, and maps but with simplistic text and a carefully controlled vocabulary. In Japan textbooks tend to be short, paperbound volumes with more sophisticated text and relatively few illustrations. Thus U.S. textbooks are considerably more expensive than those used in Japanese schools. In the United States, pupils often leave their books in their lockers when they leave for the day, arguing, with some justification, that they are too heavy to carry home. Japanese textbooks are much more portable.

In Japan's homogeneous society there is a broad consensus on what constitutes appropriate values and a common culture, which is reflected in the curriculum. The Japanese curriculum is driven primarily by three forces: the inculcation of socially sanctioned behavior, values, and thought into the next generation; the preparation of students for difficult entrance examinations to the next level of schooling; and meeting the demands of the business/industrial community for well-trained, technologically literate, and obedient workers. Thus, the needs of society are pre-eminent to the needs (or desires) of the individual. Clearly there are other factors shaping the curriculum, but these are undoubtedly the most important.

The Japanese curriculum is much more prescriptive than in U.S. schools, with required courses in Japanese language, Japanese history, mathematics, science, and moral education, but with very few electives that appeal to individual interests. Japanese schools inculcate into their pupils those basic skills, knowledge, and attitudes that

have helped to move Japan from an economic basket case following World War II to today's economic superpower.

This contrasts sharply with the situation in U.S. schools, where single-issue groups often attempt to capture a piece of the curriculum to advance a particular cause. Examples include driver education, sex education, drug education, alcohol education, AIDS education, law-related education, peace education, global education, multicultural education, death education, career education, consumer education, and many more.

Moreover, U.S. schools in recent times have been expected to provide social services, such as before- and after-school day care, free breakfasts, drug counseling, health clinics, classes for pregnant teenagers, etc. There are also many communities where football, basketball, or band are treated as more important than mathematics, science, or foreign language. Still another function of U.S. schools that distinguishes them from Japanese schools is providing activities such as mixers, dances, and proms, which enable young people to develop social skills. In a fundamental sense, our schools have evolved from institutions that focused on basic academic skills and the transmission of commonly held values into broad-based social-service agencies charged with ameliorating pressing social problems, as well as serving as a source of local entertainment.

Still another major distinction between U.S. and Japanese schools is the radically different procedures for admission to college or university. In Japan one must pass rigorous entrance examinations to be admitted to the university of one's choice. These examinations primarily test an applicant's recall of "essentialist" material. The chance of students being admitted to a prestigious institution, such as Tokyo University, is determined solely by their score on the entrance examination. Not surprisingly, the Japanese high school curriculum reflects this reality. By contrast, in the United States a student's entire high school academic record as well as many other factors enter into the admission committee's decision (grade point average, extra-

curricular activities, SAT/ACT scores, personal essays, minority status, gender, teacher recommendations). Indeed, it is not unusual for a prestigious American university to accept marginal students and provide them with tutoring, financial aid, work study, and counseling services upon their arrival on campus.

American diversity is also reflected in the far greater number of both academic and nonacademic courses offered in our schools. Many of the nonacademic courses (driver education, photography, weight lifting, work experience, community service, etc.) simply are not part of the Japanese curriculum. In his study of the American high school, Ernest Boyer (1983) concluded that only 55% of U.S. high school courses were compulsory and the remainder electives. In Japan, students are allowed very few elective courses (again, the specter of entrance examinations).

Teachers and Teacher Education

Few would disagree that the key to effective education is quality teachers. Whatever the subject, if a teacher can motivate and maintain the interest of pupils, learning will occur. Whatever success Japanese education has had can be attributed to the quality of its teaching force. Influenced by its Confucian heritage, Japanese society recognizes the centrality of the teacher. The term for teacher, *sensei*, is one of those words that carries far more meaning than a literal translation suggests. Indeed, it is one of the highest forms of respect that can be bestowed on a person in Japan.

Japanese society not only holds teachers in great respect but also rewards them with good salaries. The remuneration of Japanese teachers is equal across prefectures, with a reasonable entry-level salary followed by regular increments and substantial retirement benefits. At the end of 20 years of service, for example, a typical teacher can reasonably expect to be making three times the real income of entering teachers. By contrast, teacher salaries in the United States vary greatly from district to district, often even within the same state.

After studying teacher salaries in both countries, William Cummings (1980) concluded that in Japan teachers' salaries were equivalent to those of comparable professionals, while in the United States the typical teacher earns only about 70% of what professionals with comparable educational qualifications earn. Cummings notes that as a result of the attractive salary and benefits, there is a surplus of qualified candidates for teacher openings, even for mathematics and science positions. Moreover, almost all of Japan's teachers have proper qualifications for the subject areas and levels they teach.

Beyond successfully completing the prescribed course of study, Japanese teachers also must pass the difficult appointment examination held annually and administered by each of Japan's 47 prefectures and 10 largest urban centers. Interestingly, it is not only graduates of teacher education programs who take this examination; any college or university graduate may compete for positions. This examination is so competitive that there are usually more than five applicants for every available opening. As a result, there is a large pool of qualified applicants; and to be chosen reflects favorably on successful applicants.

In Japan entering the teaching profession is a lifetime commitment. Relatively few Japanese use teaching as a stepping stone to other fields. To enter teaching is to assume broad responsibilities for students' moral education and character development as well as their academic success. The traditional image of the devoted, selfless teacher is still a common one among Japanese. It is not uncommon for teachers to phone students' parents in the evening to discuss their child's progress; and home visitations by teachers are an accepted part of their professional life.

Japanese teachers also maintain a high degree of professional involvement, with almost 75% belonging to a professional teacher association where frequent discussions of teaching methods and problems take place. In addition, the Ministry of Education sponsors a wide variety of inservice education activities.

Comparing U.S. and Japanese Classrooms

Perhaps the best explanation for why Japanese students' academic achievement is generally higher than that of their U.S. cohorts is found in the Japanese attitudes toward doing well in school. University of Pittsburgh anthropologist John Singleton (1989) argues persuasively that a major difference between American and Japanese attitudes toward schooling lies in the Japanese emphasis on *gambaru*, meaning to persist, hang on, or do one's best. Japanese students generally believe the exhortations of their parents and teachers that school is a serious business and that success is less the result of natural ability than of putting forth one's best efforts. A Japanese mother invariably stresses that her child's persistence, or lack of it, is the explanation for success or failure. Priscilla Blinco (1991), a researcher at Stanford University, contends that Japanese teachers believe that "all students can achieve if they persevere and endure hardship (*gaman suru*), especially in the pre-school and elementary years."

By contrast, American parents are more likely to attribute their children's academic deficiencies to a lack of natural ability. When this attitude is communicated to children, the response is often, "Why bother to study; I'm simply no good in mathematics (or history, etc.)." Americans tend to emphasize ability as a reflection of native intelligence and talent. When American mothers are asked to explain their child's success (or failure) in school, they tend to identify native ability as the main reason. Robert Hess, a leading student of Japanese

mathematics education, concludes that, "In Japan poor performance in mathematics was attributed to lack of effort; in the United States, explanations were more evenly divided among ability, effort and training at school" (1986).

William Cummings (1980) goes further by noting that "Under no circumstances do the teachers consciously form groups stratified by ability as is the practice in growing numbers of American schools." While acknowledging differences in ability, Japanese teachers "feel it is their responsibility as public school teachers in a democratic society to try to bring all the students up to a common level . . . [and] they seek to channel the energies of the bright into pulling their slower fellows up." As a result of this widespread belief in the efficacy of *gambaru*, Japanese teachers assume that all their pupils possess equal potential to learn. However, their level of learning depends on how well they persevere. Thus pupil achievement often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy!

Another factor that is not always given its due weight in analyzing the success of Japanese schools is the attitude toward student responsibility. It is common in public and some private schools for students to clean their own classroom. At the end of the school day, students not only sweep, dust, and tidy up but also often wet mop the classroom floor and adjoining corridors. Periodically the entire student body joins with the teachers and administrators to give the school grounds a thorough cleaning.

These practices serve several important educational purposes. They promote responsibility and group cohesion and give dignity to menial work. And perhaps just as important, by giving students responsibility for their school's appearance, they are more likely to take pride in it and less likely to vandalize it or deface it with graffiti.

Another example of the way Japanese schools develop student responsibility is the manner in which lunch is handled in the elementary schools. Since most elementary schools do not have cafeterias, hot lunches are delivered to schools by truck. When the truck arrives

each day, a group of children from each classroom is delegated to collect the lunches. While they are doing this, another group transforms the classroom into a makeshift cafeteria; and a third group becomes "servers," who don their white smocks, hats, and face masks in preparation for serving the food. When lunch is completed, the "workers" put the classroom back in order and tidy up; and soon they are ready to do their lessons for the rest of the school day.

With students taking on these kinds of responsibilities, the Japanese school authorities do not have to budget large sums for custodial services or expend capital funds to build cafeterias and hire personnel to staff them. Some of these savings can be directed to higher teacher salaries and benefits. This way of doing things is deeply embedded in Japanese culture and could not be easily exported to U.S. schools. This was made clear to me when I proposed to a group of American parents that we consider giving students such responsibilities in our schools. Their response was total opposition. Some expressed the view that requiring our children to do these kinds of chores was a violation of their human rights. One parent called it "nothing less than slave labor."

Still another attitudinal difference that is often overlooked is the Japanese belief that the group's welfare and progress is more important than that of the individual. From the first day in elementary school, children are taught that it is their responsibility to assist their "slower" classmates in order that they can keep pace with the class. And indeed, students seldom, if ever, are forced to repeat a grade because of poor performance.

These attitudes, although not directly related to classroom learning, all serve to create an environment conducive to the serious work of learning. Learning is the students' "job," a job that is pursued vigorously in a Japanese version of the work ethic.

Elementary Schools

The first day of elementary school for Japanese children is unlike anything found in the United States. It is a ceremonial occasion in

which the child is symbolically accepted into his or her school and class (*kumi*). Actually, the educational process has begun several months before this first day of school in meetings the school holds for mothers (and some fathers) of the entering children. In these meetings the parents are informed of the school's expectations for their children on a wide range of issues. This parental involvement continues throughout the child's school experience. Indeed, it has been suggested by many observers that a crucial element in the academic success of Japanese children is the intense involvement of the mother (*kyoiku mama*, or "education mama") in the education of her children.

Parental involvement also includes significant expenditures for the purchase of uniforms; special study desks (some even with a special buzzer to summon snacks from the kitchen); expensive hard-leather backpacks; and music, dance, or flower-arranging lessons.

Dressed in their best clothes, the children and their mothers (sometimes accompanied by fathers) arrive at school for the opening-day ceremony. Each child receives a name card. Then the principal makes a welcoming speech and explains what is expected of the children (and more subtly of the parents) during the coming months. This is followed by introductions and safety advice – an important item in Japanese elementary schools. The children then go to their assigned classrooms and, after a few routine chores, are released to return to their parents.

The following day, what in the United States might be called the first "real" day of school, the teachers are not concerned with beginning regular lessons, but rather with inculcating the children in how to behave in their new groups. This socialization is the teacher's first priority; she emphasizes such routines as the correct place to put one's notebook, textbook, and pencils, etc. These and other routines will be patiently repeated until the teacher is completely satisfied that all the children understand them.

Class size in Japanese elementary schools is large by U.S. standards, with up to 40 to 45 pupils for a single teacher and with no

aides. The school is typically a simple cinder-block building, and the classrooms are austere.

Because of the large class size, teachers insist on pupil compliance with procedures and spend a great deal of time and effort during the early elementary years making the classroom into a smoothly working group. William Cummings, after spending several months observing a typical Japanese elementary classroom, observed that, "The teacher had to devote no more than 10% of her time to maintaining order" (1980). This is a far cry from the situation in many American elementary classrooms.

In his study of Japanese preschools, Joseph Tobin (1989) observed that Japanese teachers delegate a good deal of responsibility to pupils. This holds true for elementary schools as well. All pupils have access to exactly the same materials and activities and share monitoring duties and other responsibilities. In addition, the Japanese elementary teacher is much less likely than a U.S. teacher to intervene in disputes between children. Instead, the Japanese teacher makes much greater use of peer-group pressure to shape appropriate behavior. One of the techniques used is to divide a class of 40 to 45 into groups of four to eight children. These groups are expected to work out problems together, to cooperate in preparing class reports, to carry out classroom chores, etc. These groups are periodically reshuffled to prevent children from forming cliques.

There is frequent communication between school and home in Japanese elementary schools. For example, when the school year begins one of the first things that happens is establishing a telephone tree so that information can be disseminated quickly and efficiently. When my son was first enrolled in a Japanese elementary school, his teacher asked him to make a simple map of the route he took from home to school. Thus both school and parents had a general sense of where to look should he not arrive at school or home at the expected time.

The Ministry of Education controls the content and sequence of the elementary curriculum and specifies what is taught in each subject

and grade level in considerable detail. Approved textbooks ensure conformity to the prescribed Course of Study. Primary emphasis at the elementary level is given to the extremely complex Japanese language, and three separate writing systems must be learned. Other core subjects are social studies, arithmetic, and science.

The Japanese elementary curriculum also strongly emphasizes art, music, and physical education. Guided by the principle of *gambaru*, teachers assume that every child can learn to play one or more musical instruments, to read music, and to draw, paint, and create simple sculptures. The music curriculum, for example, includes not only music appreciation (both Japanese and Western classical works) but also singing and instrumental performance. Young children learn to play melodies and simple harmonies on keyboard or wind instruments and receive formal instruction in reading music.

Another important component of the curriculum is moral education. Although allotted only one hour per week for formal instruction, moral education has a key role in Japanese education and is infused throughout the curriculum. In pre-World War II Japan, moral education served nationalistic and militaristic ends; but it now is focused on general character development. Moral education now pervades Japanese education.

Secondary Schools

Compared to the elementary schools, Japanese secondary schools are a different world. The pressure of preparing for the all-important university (and often high school) entrance examinations shape the lower secondary school (grades 7 to 9) academic experience. Lower secondary classrooms tend to be plain, even Spartan. Desks are arranged into rigid rows, and the teacher instructs from a small table often on a raised platform in the front of the classroom. This austere setting reflects the seriousness of purpose of Japanese secondary education and is in striking contrast to informal U.S. secondary classrooms with flexible seating arrangements and colorful bulletin boards.

Upon entering lower secondary public school, students are commonly required to wear uniforms. Boys garbed in black, quasi-military uniforms with high stiff collars and girls in dark sailor uniforms crowd the morning and afternoon subways and commuter trains. In many respects, the school uniform reflects the role identification of Japanese youth. Whereas U.S. students have multiple identities (student, athlete, cheerleader, student government leader, part-time worker, etc.), the Japanese student's total identity is that of student and all that role implies. When the Japanese father steps on the commuter train each morning and heads off to work in his trading company, young Taro and Sachiko head off for their "job" as well.

Whereas U.S. secondary teachers feel they must make their lessons interesting in order to motivate and engage students, Japanese educators begin with the assumption that going to school is a great deal like going to work. Learning is not fun but hard work, and students are expected to be diligent in doing their assignments. School work is a series of tasks to be mastered; and if one can successfully pass the university entrance examinations, then one is on the escalator to success. Again the idea of *gambaru* or persistent effort comes into play. In a fundamental sense, most Japanese are convinced that *gambaru* contributes to moral character, inner strength, and intelligence; in short, a successful person.

According to Thomas Rohlen (1983), in Japan "Sitting in class is the most basic experience of high school." Japanese high school teachers focus on transmitting a great deal of information, most often in lecture form, in order to prepare their charges to pass the university entrance examination. The key to doing so is mastering a large body of factual material. This emphasis on information is reinforced in the "cram schools," which a large percentage of students attend in the late afternoon and evening.

While baseball is a favorite after-school activity (the national high school tournaments are televised throughout the nation and everybody, it seems, has one eye on the outcome), Japanese secondary schools

are much more academically oriented than their American counterparts. Having said that, however, it must be pointed out that not all high schools fit this model. There is a clear hierarchy among high schools, with those that send a large percentage of their graduates to "good" universities at the zenith. Japanese vocational high schools and evening high schools are very different institutions.

Two important points must be kept in mind when discussing Japanese education. First, while Japanese childhood education (preschool through grade 6) is as good, and often significantly better, as that in other parts of the world, this level of quality often begins to decline as one enters the lower secondary level. By the time one enters high school, the pressures of university entrance examinations distort the curriculum, making it an exercise in rote learning in order to meet externally imposed standards.

In the view of many, the weakest link in the Japanese system is higher education. It is reputed that even the most prestigious universities, such as Tokyo and Kyoto in the public sector and Keio and Waseda in the private sector, do not challenge their students. University students have already met their greatest challenge – passing the entrance examination – and will likely go on to graduate with little effort.

The second point to keep in mind is that although Japanese education has enjoyed a favorable press abroad, it has its dark side. Not all Japanese students fit into the existing system or even play along with it. In the United States we hear a lot about the strengths of the Japanese education system, but seldom do we hear much about that vast student population who do not aspire to enter Tokyo University. Among these are the increasing number of so-called "school refusal syndrome" cases and the increasing number of incidents of *ijime* (bullying by one's peers) that have, on occasion, led to death, not to mention juvenile suicides and the so-called *kikokushijo* ("returnee children").

What Can We Learn from Japanese Education?

During the Meiji Period (1868-1912), virtually all Western scholars interpreted Japan's institutions from the perspective of how the Japanese had borrowed or adapted Western ideas and culture. This situation existed through World War II and well into the postwar period. Only in the last two decades, primarily in reaction to Japan's spectacular economic growth, have contemporary scholars begun to look at Japan in a different way. Ezra Vogel's best-selling book, *Japan as No. One* (1979), is the most extreme example of this genre. It was clearly a step in the direction of redressing the patronizing view of Japan held by most Americans, but it was too one-sided in Japan's favor to be taken as an approximation of reality. Although Vogel got the attention of his fellow citizens, his approach has now outlived whatever usefulness it had when he published it.

Americans need to go beyond the "Japan as No. One" approach by recognizing not only the considerable strengths of the Japanese educational enterprise but some of its weaknesses as well. One of the fascinations of studying a foreign educational system is to search for ideas and practices that might be relevant to one's own system. That approach is, however, fraught with danger and should be done with great caution.

Recently, it has become fashionable for some Americans to take a brief trip to Japan, visit a school or two, talk with a handful of Japanese educators, have lunch at a local sushi stand, and return home

as "instant experts" advocating that the United States emulate all or part of the Japanese educational model. What these well-intentioned people forget is that an educational system is an organic outgrowth of a specific cultural context and that, removed from this context, the system loses its *raison d'être*. The Japanese system cannot be successfully uprooted and planted in a radically different American culture. If we wanted to adopt the Japanese system, we would first have to completely restructure our cultural life.

The Japanese are essentially a group-oriented society (although not to the extent that some believe), and the United States honors the idea of individuality (also not to the extent we claim). Harmony and order, based on Confucian ideals, are important concepts in Japan, while Americans place great stress on the Holy Grail of creativity and individual freedom. It should not surprise us, therefore, that the Japanese education system is among the most highly centralized in the world and that this results in a subject-oriented curriculum and teacher-centered classrooms. Neither should it surprise us that the American system tends toward decentralization, with a fragmented curriculum, a greater emphasis on social concerns, and student-centered classrooms.

The Japanese, however, value education highly and support it by their actions as well as their words. That education is important is reflected in the respect accorded to teachers, including the reasonably attractive salaries paid to them. Rhetoric to the contrary, too many Americans neither value education nor are willing to pay higher taxes to improve it; too many parents fail to insist that their children do their homework; and, in general, parent participation in school-sponsored activities is sorely lacking. This lukewarm attitude toward the value of education is, in my judgment, at the heart of our educational problems.

Japanese schools are demanding. Students are exposed to a much broader range of basic subjects, especially in mathematics and the sciences. And they study them in greater depth for a much longer

period of time. The results of this rigorous approach are reflected not only in the superior performance of Japanese students on international achievement tests but also in Japan's generally better-educated workforce. Indeed, after teaching in Japanese universities, I am no longer shocked when I find that Japanese students often know more about American history than do U.S. students!

Further evidence that the Japanese take education seriously is that students attend school 5½ days a week, 240 days a year (as compared to about 180 days a year in the United States). If one factors in this extra time, the Japanese high school graduate will spend the equivalent of 16 years in school compared to the 12 years for the U.S. high school graduate. Japanese students also spend several hours a night on homework, as well as completing major projects during their shorter holiday.

Although compulsory education in Japan ends at grade 9, almost 94% of Japanese youths attend upper secondary school full time, while another 2% attend part time. And almost 95% of those entering the non-compulsory upper secondary grades go on to graduate. By comparison, the high school completion rate in the United States is approximately 71%.

An important pedagogical consequence of Japan's group orientation is the emphasis on the individual's responsibility to school and classmates. Whereas many American urban schools are defaced with graffiti and campus guards (often armed) are needed to provide security for students and teachers, Japanese schools are generally calm, well-ordered environments for learning. This is not to suggest that Japanese schools are problem-free but only that the nature of the problems are of a far less magnitude than in the United States. Once more, the group orientation of Japanese society tends to act as a strong deterrent to antisocial behavior. Such behavior, of course, does occur on occasion; but it is seldom as frequent or as serious as in U.S. schools. By contrast, discipline in many U.S. schools is problematic at best. When children are taught from an early age, implicitly as

well as overtly, that expressing one's individuality and exercising one's freedom are a birthright, then a "me" attitude often develops that is manifested in acting-out behavior that is disruptive to classroom learning. And cutting classes and absenteeism are seen as "no big deal."

Since two very different cultures have given birth to two very different educational systems, one might ask is there anything that Americans might learn from the Japanese? In terms of borrowing wholesale specific elements of the Japanese system, my answer would be no. Yet there are some important general lessons that we might learn from studying the Japanese system. I conclude this fastback with some modest proposals, which I believe are within the realm of possibility:

1. First and foremost, we can learn from the Japanese the true value of education and begin to take it as seriously as they do. In today's increasingly global society, we simply must prepare our youth for an increasingly complex and technologically oriented future in which our nation will face even greater challenges than it does today. We have analyzed the nature of our educational problems *ad infinitum*, and we know what must be done to rectify them. But when the proposed solutions cost a lot of money, are politically controversial, or threaten the status quo, we find that we lack the courage to do what needs to be done. Theodore Sizer observed in his neglected *Places of Learning, Places of Joy* (1973) that we Americans have the education system we want. If we seriously wanted a different system, we would find a way to achieve it. In other words, we express our ideals with rhetoric, but convenience and our wallets determine our actions.

2. Much nonsense has been written about educating for "cultural literacy" over the past few years. Following the prescriptions of Allan Bloom (1987) and E.D. Hirsch (1987) will not solve our problems and, indeed, would probably exacerbate them. Having said this, however, it is clear that much of Japan's educational success is based on its rigorous curriculum and the high academic expectations that the system (supported by parents) places on youngsters. It is true that in an essentially homogeneous, monocultural, and monolingual soci-

ety like Japan, it is easier to achieve a higher level of literacy than it is in our fragmented, multicultural society. However, there is no reason why academic standards in our schools cannot be raised significantly. But in order to do this, we need to take education much more seriously than we currently do.

3. A widespread view among U.S. educators is that more money is the answer to our educational problems. That answer is too simplistic. The Japanese spend significantly less money on public education than does the United States and manage to do quite well with rather basic buildings, classrooms, and equipment. Perhaps we should reallocate the resources used to build the educational "palaces" common to many school districts and spend them on improving the instructional program and teacher salaries. Then we could do a better job of educating those talented young people who now flock into our business and law schools.

None of these proposals is especially radical. Indeed, most of them are harmonious with traditional American values. Even if they were all implemented, they would not be a panacea for America's educational problems. They would, however, begin to move us in the right direction; and perhaps that is the best that we can hope to achieve at this point in our history.

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